

Psalm 70: "Help"
How to Talk to God, Part I
Grace UMC
16th Sunday After Pentecost
September 4, 2016

Several times a day, monks around the world begin their time of prayer with a verse from the Psalms that we just heard - Psalm 70:1. A common English version is, "O Lord, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me!" Every day - morning, noon, and evening - this simple prayer for God's help marks the beginning of prayer for people dedicated to God.

The simplicity of this prayer is striking. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates it this way: "God! Please hurry to my rescue! God, come quickly to my side!"

Monks and other Christians have made this particular prayer a cornerstone of their walk with God at least since the 5th century. In the 400s AD a monk in the Egyptian Desert named John Cassian wrote a guide for monks that became a bit of a classic. He writes that this verse, Psalm 70:1, was chosen out of all of Scripture to help God's people keep up a "continual recollection" of God. Of all the 31,102 verses of Scripture, this one was chosen to help people keep God at the center of their lives each day.

Using this particular verse for prayer makes a lot of sense given what Jesus said about prayer.

6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

7 "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"Do not heap up empty phrases," Jesus says. Don't be like those who just add words on top of words and hope they are heard - keep it short and simple, because the Father knows before you even ask. In that sense, something as basic as "God! Hurry to help me!" seems to fit the bill perfectly.

Today we begin a series called "How to Talk to God." We are going to look at four simple prayers that help us connect with God. It is often the simplest things in life that are the most profound - saying "I love to you" to your spouse or children before you part ways, enjoying a sunset or a cup of coffee, holding hands, saying "I'm sorry." In the same way, the most powerful prayers are often the simplest.

Anne Lamotte gave me some inspiration for this series with her book *Help/Thanks/Wow*. I've added "Why" to her list, which we'll talk about in a couple of weeks. You might enjoy reading her book as we go along; I will mention it occasionally but my sermons will be distinct from the content of the book. I do like her description of prayer: "Communication from one's heart to God's heart." It's not for display purposes - not "heaping up empty phrases" like Jesus warned about. Prayer is the chief way we connect with God, grow in God, get to know God. The more honest the communication, the more prayer draws us into God's life.

Today we will explore the first of four simple prayers: "help." In some ways, this prayer is both easy and unnatural. For those of us raised in the church, it is perhaps the kind of prayer we are most used to - prayer for help getting through a rough patch, an illness, a relationship problem, a work issue. We are often pretty good at praying for ourselves and not always good at praying for others. Balance is key; of course we should pray for our own needs, but we are also called to pray for our neighbors, those we know and those we don't, those near and those far away. We need God's help. Our neighbors, friends, family, and family members also need God's help. So we pray, simply, humbly, but boldly, for us and for others.

This is a radical and strange prayer in some ways. We live in a very individualistic culture that tells us not to rely on help from outsiders. Praying for God's help, for God to intervene, to make God's presence known in our life or in a situation, doesn't come naturally to everyone. We often hear the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves." I would prefer if we stopped at, "God helps." Yes, people have to want help; yes, our response to God's grace matters. But before everything else, God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to redeem us, to make us his own. God helps us before we can ever help ourselves, and even when we are in open rebellion against God. Because of how God has acted in the past, because God acted for our benefit before we ever even knew we were needed God, we are bold to pray for God's help in any and all circumstances.

We learn to pray for God's help by constantly practicing it. Do you pray each day? Do you make time when you wake up, or before you go to bed? There is never a time we do not need God's help. That's why I pray before every sermon!

A word of encouragement: Prayer is always hard before it is easy; always unnatural before it is natural. Any prayer offered sincerely to God is beautiful; it's not about a lot of words, it's not about eloquence - remember the words of Jesus! - it's about connection with God. "O God, hurry up and help me!"

If you want to learn this particular prayer, prayer for God's help, there are few better places than the Psalms to learn to pray. The Psalms are the Bible's prayer book, the prayers that have shaped the lives of Jews and Christians, the prayers that Jesus learned as a boy, the prayers that have been on the lips and in the hearts of countless saints throughout time. Eugene Peterson put it this way: "The great and sprawling university that Hebrews and Christians have attended to answer God, to learn to pray, has been the Psalms." In this series, we will refer to the Psalms constantly. They provide words when we don't have them. We learn to pray through these prayers. There is no human experience or crisis that is foreign to the Psalms.

One last thing. We should remember that prayer and action are not opposites. James 2:16-17 reminds us that simply wishing people well is not enough, if we can do something: *If one of you tells him, "Go in peace; stay warm and well fed," but does not provide for his physical needs, what good is that?*¹⁷ So too, faith by itself, if it is not complemented by action, is dead.

It's possible that God might want to answer someone else's prayer through you, or through us. There's a good chance that someone you know needs help that you, and only you can give: a shoulder to cry on, a friend to pray with, someone to tell them that they matter, someone to tell them that they are valuable. We serve a lot of hungry people in our building, answering many prayers for a hot meal, and even deeper, prayers to treat folks with compassion and empathy. Our mission teams answer prayers from people all over the world. Pope Francis connected prayer and action this way: "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works." Prayer is not a substitute for action. They go together. A good prayer might be, "Lord, help me to want others' prayers answered as much as I want me own answered."

In all things, prayer - and especially the simple prayer for help - means that we recognize our need for God. Notice again the end of Psalm 70: "I am poor and needy. Come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer." We cannot live only from our own resources, our own power. We need God. In prayer, we recognize that need and seek God. We seek God's help. We give thanks. We ask why. We say "wow."

When we get the privilege of celebrating communion, we hold out our hands and remember that God helped us before we could ever help ourselves, and we receive the answer to our prayer in a piece of bread and a cup. God has come to us. God continues to come to us, beckoned by the simplest of prayers. "Lord, hurry to help me. Lord, I need you. Lord, I can't do this alone." As we go to the table, let us receive again the body and blood, and take it as a promise that God will never stop answering our prayer, and coming to help us. Thanks be to God. Amen.